



GATHERING PLACE

Students get involved when the Legislature hits the road

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 31, 2009

More than a decade ago, I designed a Legislative Roadshow to "take the Legislature" to students in my district. We all recognize that the students' voices are important to the legislative process, and the challenge was to figure out how to let them voice their opinions.

The Legislative Roadshow is an interactive program designed to educate children on the legislative process and allow them to voice their opinions on the issues that directly affect them and their families. As in the past, this year my staff and I brought the Roadshow to our Windward schools.

This year we asked the students to consider two bills: House Bill 398, which allows the county to have jurisdiction over the use of private fireworks with an eye toward limiting their use; and Senate Bill 760, which prohibits the use of cell phones while operating a vehicle, unless a hands-free device is being used. In preparation for the "mock hearings" my staff and I conduct at the Roadshow, we asked the students to prepare and present their own testimony in front of us as if they were really testifying at the Capitol.

It was refreshing to see how much the students embraced the opportunity to speak out in favor or against the legislation. They were eager, well prepared and glad for the opportunities to give us their insight. I find that I am continually impressed with both the students' desire to learn about how their government works and their drive to have an impact on the process.

When discussing the issue of fireworks, there was an equal divide between students opposing and supporting any kind of control a county could possibly exercise, though the majority emphasized that they would be disappointed if a complete ban of fireworks would result. Family tradition and opportunities to celebrate the holidays in more meaningful ways were frequently raised as oppositional arguments as students passionately debated the pros and cons of passing the bill; many felt that leaving the decision to ban fireworks to counties could hurt the rich holiday traditions that have been established in Hawaii.

The students who argued in favor of the bill specifically hit on the numerous health hazards posed by the resulting air pollution. Many had personally witnessed family members and pets suffering during the holidays and felt that the privilege of being able to pop fireworks was being abused. Some students also indicated that the resulting noise pollution has frightened their pets, causing them to wander away.

When the students addressed the issue of using cell phones while driving, a surprisingly large majority

felt that the dangers outweighed the benefits. While some argued that cell phones were necessary in the case of an emergency or for work purposes, a majority felt that it was safer to ban phones from cars altogether, citing that it was the conversation itself that distracts an individual mentally from the road. Others in support of a ban added that the use of cell phones slows reaction times, especially when text messaging is factored into the equation.

The Roadshow is a special time for me. In too many cases we don't give youngsters an opportunity to speak out on issues that directly affect them, such as fireworks and using a cell phone while driving. Programs such as the Legislative Roadshow help legislators get a broader sense of the opinions of their constituency, and students can most certainly be counted as having an influence.

I encourage them to consider future service in the Legislature. By giving our young voices more chances to not only speak out, but be heard, I have no doubt that their wisdom and participation will ensure Hawaii's future to be a bright one.

Cynthia Thielen, a Republican, is assistant minority leader of the state House of Representatives, where she represents the 50th District (Kailua-Kaneohe Bay).

Find this article at:

http://www.starbulletin.com/editorials/guesteditorials/20090331_Students_get_involved_when_the_Legislature_hits_the_road.html

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.